

DECOLONISING THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CHALLENGES

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—Abstract—

The end of apartheid in 1994 and the ongoing student protests since 2015 have caused renewed interest in the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. Since this time, the model of academic organisation which underlies many South African universities has not considerably changed. These institutions tend to remain colonial outposts, rooted in Western disciplinary knowledge. The decolonisation of the curriculum is an important question that warrants attention, given that epistemic and hegemonic systems at most South African universities were entrenched during apartheid. This article examines a view of decolonisation that is based on transforming the South African higher education curriculum, a curriculum that is generally designated as westernised and Eurocentric. The research question is: Which challenges are faced in the attempt to decolonise the South African higher education curriculum? Because a qualitative research design accounts for experience and perception, it was deemed most suitable for the purpose of this article. A review of relevant literature provided a foundation for an interpretation of the challenges encountered. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academics within a higher education environment to determine whether the different challenges or themes as propounded by the literature align with those articulated by the interviewees. The researchers found

that the call for the decolonisation of institutions and curricula presents challenges to the academic project as well as to academics. There is not sufficiently-developed African content to jettison Western education without leaving a void. Yet decolonisation is feasible and does not have to be a protracted process. For this reason South African institutions of higher learning should provide research solutions for the nation by developing curricula based on the best knowledge, skills, morals, beliefs and traditions from Africa, as well as Europe. Such a curriculum will relate to the needs of students; in other words, it will be fit for purpose.

Key Words: decolonisation, curriculum, challenges, epistemic and hegemony

JEL Classification: I23

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current system of higher education (HE) discourse, decolonisation is at the forefront of a stimulating and heated debate. Colonial powers conquered the terrain of the colonised and enslaved their bodies, and also their minds. Cultivating a new cultural identity through a European lingua franca and disciplines such as education, economics, science and law, the colonists alienated the colonised from their own culture and denied them a space to speak from their own frames of reference (Chilisa 2012). Prioritising all things European resulted in “the denigration and decimation of indigenous knowledges” (Le Grange 2016:4). In South Africa, the current model of academic organisation of the university, based on Western and colonial disciplinary knowledge, was established during apartheid and has not been significantly revolutionised in post-apartheid (Le Grange, 2016). Much of what is taught today is a legacy from the colonial past. Consequently, the higher education system is still largely racial and class-based. It endorses Western knowledge and rationality, but discounts and represses the knowledges of the formerly colonised people. In 2015, students and a small number of progressive academics, who realised how foreign and alienating South African institutional structures were, began a campaign to end “the domination of Western epistemological traditions, histories and figures” (Molefe, 2016:32) by decolonising the South African higher education curriculum. Genç (2013) submits that a curriculum is more than a set of subjects, module frameworks, prescribed readings and assessments guidelines; it is everything that goes on within the institution, including extra-curricular activities and interpersonal relations. It includes the stories that students are told about their past, present and future. In effect, it is the transmission of a cultural heritage and the planning of a nation.

This article examines the process of replanning a nation based on transforming the curriculum of the South African higher education (HE) system. South Africa's westernised and Eurocentric higher education curriculum may no longer be fit (appropriate) for purpose. Fit for purpose means that something is of a decent standard for something or someone. In essence, it is good enough to do the task it was designed to do, accomplish or attain. The vehement student protests – #FeesMust Fall and #RhodesMustFall – that reverberated nationally in 2015 were instrumental in bringing the demand for an Afrocentric curriculum and education to the fore, and reveal that there are indeed concerns pertaining to the relevancy. Students articulated that the content of the curriculum was developed without considering their needs and the context in which it was going to be implemented. In other words, the subject content lacked authenticity and alienated them from their own culture. At the Higher Education Summit held in October 2015, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, called for the Africanisation of universities, demanding that all universities are to discard the problematic elements of their colonial and apartheid past (Le Grange 2016). Yet the road to decolonisation is not an easy one. As Le Grange (2016:5-6) observes: “decolonisation is not an event but a process” There are also conflicting opinions about how to go about the process of decolonising knowledge and the curriculum. The researchers view that it should be carefully managed as various challenges will have to be overcome.

The theoretical framework underpinning the challenges of dismantling the hegemony of Western epistemologies in the higher education curriculum is, undisputedly, conflict theory. Sinn (2016) conveys that conflict theory relates to social groups who are in a constant struggle for scarce resources and power. Conflict theory elucidates how conflict shapes the social world, leads to change and empowers the marginalised. In the social sciences, conflict theory is used to examine the power dynamics among members of opposing groups. Conflict arises when groups of individuals challenge or contest laws, institutions, social policies and a status quo that promotes inequality (Forsyth & Copes, 2014). Examples of such conflict are clashes and violence, and protests and revolutions.

The purpose of this article is to investigate four challenges of decolonising the South African higher education curriculum that may potentially lead to conflict. These challenges were identified by means of a literature review and then confirmed in one-on-one interviews with individuals. The four themes or challenges that emerged are: lack of content and authorities, time, the perception that Western knowledge is superior, and resistance to change.

2. METHODOLOGY

Because a qualitative research design accounts for experience, perception and meaning, it was considered most suitable. In the first part of the paper, a literature review provided a foundation for an explanatory and descriptive interpretation of the challenges encountered when incorporating indigenous knowledge and skills in higher education. Interviews were also conducted to determine whether the different challenges or themes as outlined by the literature correspond to those articulated by respondents. The study was guided by a contextual approach to data collection and interpretation. The reasoning adopted was inductive reasoning.

The researchers identified fifteen academics within a higher education environment by means of the purposive sampling method, which, according to Creswell (2012), implies that the researchers select individuals or research site(s) as guided by the principle of fitness for the purpose. In this instance participants were selected on the basis of whether they meet the requirements of the study's objectives. Participants were informed about the research and asked if they would be willing to participate. Nine of the fifteen individuals (60%) invited to attend the interview agreed. Ethical considerations were taken into account in that the researchers explained what the research project entailed and its objectives, and assured participants that their responses would be treated as confidential and anonymous. Participants were also told that they did not have to participate in or complete the interview. The participants gave consent to be part of the research and communicated their understanding of the research project. Before the interview commenced, the interviewers asked interviewees if they had any questions.

This study was conducted in 2018 and 2019 with academics from the Vaal University of Technology, Vanderbijlpark and from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Participants received a questionnaire approximately one month before they were interviewed. Giving the questionnaire to respondents before the interview allowed them the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the key concepts in the questionnaire and to reflect on their teaching styles and the content of the syllabus they teach. The interviewers had a core list of questions that each participant was asked during the interview; this ensured standardisation and consistency in the types of questions posed. When the interviewers deemed it necessary, they could clarify particular questions to the interviewees. Interviewers also had the flexibility to follow up questions with additional questions in order to probe the interviewees' responses further. The interviewers guarded against leading questions to certain responses, which would

introduce bias (Laxton, 2004). The open-ended questions that were asked gave participants the opportunity to express themselves freely. The duration of the interview was on average 15 minutes. In sequencing the interview questions, Laxton's (2004) recommendation of starting with fact-based questions was followed. Only after the factual questions were asked and interviewees felt more at ease, were they required to comment on their understanding of the term decolonisation, their experience of decolonisation in the higher education environment, if they think decolonisation is feasible, and the current context and challenges of decolonising the South African higher education curriculum. Participants were asked at the end of the interview process if there was anything else they wished to add in the event of the author not thinking of or being aware of certain issues pertinent to the research. The participants' responses to interview questions were captured verbatim. Shorthand notes containing the primary data collected in the interviews were typed immediately after each interview. The typed data was then subjected to content analysis.

Anderson (1990:222) describes interviews as "a specialised form of communication between people for a specific purpose associated with some agreed subject matter". Laxton (2004) reports that a major advantage of interviews is the ability to obtain in-depth, qualitative information. As compared to other techniques of data collection, for example surveys and questionnaires, interviews enable researchers to gain research-relevant information based on (i) emotions, feelings, experiences, (ii) sensitive issues and, (iii) insider experience. This research intended to explore interviewees' emotions and experiences regarding decolonisation in the HE environment. Interviews also generated the evidence for achieving the research objectives of describing, predicting or explaining (Cohen et al., 2007). Because conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing the data provided by them are time-consuming, the number of interviewees was limited.

A substance investigation was applied to decipher the patterns or themes that emerged from the question and answer data. The researchers employed Cresswell's (2014) six steps to examine and analyse the qualitative information generated by the participant responses: 1) The data was organised and prepared for examination and analysis; 2) The researchers read the data to obtain a general sense of the information and to assess its overall meaning and importance; 3) The data was coded by organising it into categories and labelling the categories; 4) The coding process was applied to describe the categories or themes that emerged as findings; 5) The researchers described and gave details on the themes or challenges; and 6) they interpreted the findings to discover what they have learnt.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2016) defines decolonisation as the withdrawal of direct colonialism or colonial administration from colonies. Historically and in its juridical-political sense, it means the end of colony; that is, the period after the collapse of colonial rule. Smith (1999) identifies deconstruction and reconstruction as an element of decolonisation. This and other obstacles to converting the curriculum, as identified in the literature, will be discussed subsequently.

3.1. Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Present-day educational discourse answers to an ideologically driven educational practice that expects persons to be educated for the development and maintenance of sociological and environmental functions, as well as for economic purposes (Higgs, 2002). In such a climate, education is the servant of the state, touting a political agenda. Deconstruction involves taking apart the system to expose its flawed foundations and reconstructing it on a new basis. A unique and powerful mode of mind for looking at ideas and concepts, deconstruction questions assumptions cloaked in ethical, philosophical, juridical and political concerns, not necessarily to tear them down, but to gain a new awareness. In the field of education, it signifies the disruption of the dominant ideological influences that regulate and constrain South Africa's educational system – turning it into a process of information transfer that ensures conformity to socio-economic and political designs – and contemplating what education can and should do in terms of justice and our responsibility towards others. Deconstruction, in conjunction with reconstruction, implies disposing of that which has been wrongly written, and radically “interrogating distortions of people's life experiences, negative labelling, deficit theorizing, genetically deficient or culturally deficient models that pathologized the colonised . . .” (Chilisa 2012:17). It involves asking ourselves difficult questions, such as why we are the way we are, why we do the things we do, why we live the way we live, and why the things that happened to us happened. By finding answers to these questions, and by retelling the stories of the past and re-envisioning the future, deconstruction and reconstruction can change the nature of educational discourse by allowing it to open up and think and speak for itself, instead of for the state, a dominant ideology or social practices.

Mbembe (2016) postulates that before implementing an Africanised version of the HE curriculum, educators will need to affirm education in the face of different forms of knowledge, and reject or, at least, restructure the Western model of academic organisation that turns students into customers and consumers. Whereas

deep learning entails the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of established views, modern-day students learn for the purpose of acquiring skills that will make them work smarter and faster and help their employers gain an edge in the global economy. The outcome is a generation of students that are more interested in the use their ‘educational commodities’ will have on the open market – in other words, the material payoff of their studies – and less in the reconstruction of knowledge and experience that will enable them to accumulate and control further knowledge and experience and participate in an ever-changing society. Mbembe (2016) attributes this phenomenon to institutions that are operated in accordance with business principles and aim to satisfy their customers above everything else.

3.2. Scarcity of Theory

A further challenge to decolonising the curriculum is articulated by Lindauer and Pritchett. Lindauer and Pritchett (2002) believe that the scarcity of theory and evidence-based research from which to draw are a bigger problem than the lack of a dominant set of big ideas that command universal acclaim. Higher education (HE) requires an environment where academics are trained and curricula developed. Without trained academics and without localised theory in HE to develop curricula, the educational system will be an off-the-(European) shelf imported facility, with little relevance to the lived circumstances of students and society. The outcome of this is the systematic subversion of the wisdom and knowledges that reside in indigenous peoples’ experiences, histories and worldviews (Le Grange 2016). To guard against this, Heleta (2016) stresses that South African institutions of higher learning must tackle and deconstruct the epistemic violence and hegemony of Eurocentrism which impede decolonisation and allow unequal power relations and minority privilege to remain prevalent. Epistemic violence or epistemicide signifies the decimation or murder of non-western ways of knowing or seeing the world, languages and culture. The eradication of the knowledges of the subordinated culture precipitates the erasure of the social groups that possess it. In South Africa, a hegemonic tradition undermines anything that is articulated, thought and envisioned from outside these frames, seeing this as regressive and valueless. Hence, the South African HE system remains a colonial outpost that reproduces hegemonic identities instead of eliminating hegemony and contributing to social transformation. This would explain why in 2015 only 60 per cent of black students completed their first year of studies, and 25 per cent of those enrolled eventually graduated (Le Grange, 2016).

3.3. Epistemological issues

The lack of theory exacerbates the corrosive culture of consultancy that turns South Africans into informants instead of knowledge producers or creators (Mamdani, 2011). Dei (2000) points out that indigenous (African) knowledge does not exist in what could be described as a pristine fashion and that hegemonic views of the west still reside within our society. Moreover, plans to Africanise the curriculum might be there, but the willingness – political and personal – to implement these plans is lacking (Department of Education, 2008). Thus, the HE system and curriculum continue to reinforce the belief that there is not much we can learn from the Africa, developing countries and the Third World and that universal knowledge derives from the Western world (Pillay, 2015).

3.4. Other Challenges

Jonathan Jansen (2016), former rector and vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State (2009-2017), argues that a major challenge to doing away with curricula that perpetuate Western bias is getting academics and students involved in critical conversations on a regular basis. Nevertheless, at certain HE institutions there has been little or no attempt to seriously engage in discussions about what it means to decolonise knowledge, thought, curricula, disciplines and the university or academy. The debate on decolonisation that characterises South Africa's changing educational landscape is regarded as noise that will, in due course, die down and therefore does not merit any particular attention (Jansen, 2018).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It was discovered during the interviews with the academics that most of them did share a reformist perception of decolonising the curriculum to make it more suitable for the majority of students in higher education in South Africa. While three participants (33%) wished that the noise surrounding decolonisation would die down so that universities could adhere to the existing westernised Eurocentric curriculum, the majority (67%) understood the need to introduce a considerably more progressive and relevant Afrocentric curriculum that will further social cohesion, cultural representation and meaningful access to knowledge in the South African educational context.

The discussion of the findings are structured according to four key themes or challenges which emerged from the participants' answers.

4.1. Lack of content and human resources

Three of the participants (33%) agreed with Le Grange (2016) that one of the biggest challenges of decolonising education is not only what we teach but also how we teach. The information and knowledge that Africa has produced is not sufficient to compete on a global scale or to inspire Africans. Le Grange (2016) posits that the call for the decolonisation of institutions and curricula presents challenges to academic institutions as well as to academics. If African models of academic organisation were to replace Western ones, curricula will need to be reconstructed to include knowledge systems and epistemological traditions from the global South. Intellectual authorities to spearhead the process will have to be located.

Congruent with what the literature reports, academics concur that South Africa's HE educational system, in general, still endorses Western knowledge and rationality at the expense of non-Western methods of knowing. This calls to mind the unequal relationship that existed between coloniser and colonised where the colonising culture positioned itself as superior while the colonised culture was relegated to the periphery (Ramogale, 2019). To make reparation for the injustice of the past, the Council of Higher Education in 2017 advocated the introduction of disciplines such as African Studies, or the replacement of a particular canon of works perceived to be Eurocentric in nature by locally-produced texts. The CHE's aim is to develop appropriate rigorous local content that serves the needs of students and addresses the developmental challenges of South Africa, as well as contribute to knowledge production from Africa. In *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) writes that the lack of congruency between colonial education and Africa's indigenous traditions has created a people who are distant from their reality and foreigners in their own land. The CHE's efforts to create curriculum relevancy should diminish the feeling of alienation that students experience and expressed during the 2015 protests. The shackles of colonialism can be released and structural disenfranchisement overcome if academics and students push their thinking about decolonised education into practise.

4.2. Time

In line with Lindauer and Pritchett (2002), three participants (44%) identified time as a reason to delay the implementation of a new curriculum. These academics expressed concern about how long it would take to replace a Eurocentric educational system with a system that draws on both home-grown and international theories and science. As the academics put it: "Colonisation did not

happen overnight and neither will it be undone in a flash. In the opinion of this academic, “changing the system at tertiary level would be next to impossible.” However, the demand of the majority to be emancipated from the domination of Western epistemologies is not new. Mbembe (2016) recollects that the calls for decolonisation and Africanisation, particularly in higher education institutions, have been challenged and stifled whenever they arose in the past.

In response to these participants’ concerns, the researchers contend that if an institution is resistant to change, it will find an excuse, but if it is committed to authentic transformation, it will find a way to implement it. Decolonisation is possible and does not have to be a protracted process. South African universities are not ivory towers (domains of intellectual pursuit at the exclusion of everything else), and can act as “hotbeds of research solutions for the nation” (Wingfield (2017:1). The deputy vice-chancellor for teaching and learning at the Mangosuthu University of Technology, Professor Marcus Ramogale (2019) avows that universities can become hubs for social inclusion and centres that advance the intellectualisation of African indigenous knowledges. Some universities have indeed heeded students’ call for free quality, decolonised education and taken the initiative to implement strategies for academic transformation. For example, at the University of Cape Town (UCT), a central curriculum committee was appointed, tasked with incorporating knowledge systems based on indigenous cultures, histories and traditions into the curriculum. Stellenbosch University (Maties) has adopted a curriculum renewal project that purposes to dismantle Cartesian dualism and will result in the decolonisation of at least ten academic programmes, such as medicine and law. It is estimated that it will take two years for the ten programmes to be extensively renewed. Some new modules have already been introduced at this institution in 2019. At the University of Johannesburg (UJ), all first-year undergraduate students have to take an online module, African Insights, to familiarise themselves with the philosophies and writings of African leaders. The University of South Africa (UNISA) amended its language policy in 2016 to give effect to the transformation agenda of the country’s educational landscape. This open-distance university committed itself to functional multilingualism by beginning to produce multilingual glossaries as tools for teaching and learning. These glossaries will build capacity in all official South African languages so that these languages can eventually be used as a medium for instruction in higher education.

4.3. The perception that Western (white) knowledge is superior

As Dei (2000) holds forth, the challenge of the perceived superiority of Western (white) knowledge is another obstacle to changing the curriculum. One participant emphasised that the perception of stakeholders, such as the parents of students, is that a Eurocentric qualification at a westernised institution is desirable because it will improve their children's chances to enter the global arena. This participant declared that many believe that "white is right". She recalled a ditty from the apartheid era ("Black, Brown and White") that reinforced her perceptions of the superiority of being white: "If you was white, should be all right / If you was brown, stick around / But as you's black, mmm brother, git back git back git back." Another academic mentioned that to decolonise higher education will make students' world smaller, not bigger: "It will confine them to the proverbial box that we have been trying our whole careers to make them think out of." According to these two participants, decolonising the curriculum could dilute the content and the meaning attached to it since an unadulterated Afrocentric curriculum and scholarly knowledge are, if not inferior, then at any rate thought of as inferior. It will not be possible to remain intellectually superior if we stay only with what is familiar – if Africa is the beginning and end of our knowledge. One interviewee said: "What works in Africa does not work in the rest of the world". It appears that at least three participants are under the impression that a decolonised curriculum means that "any and all information that comes from any culture except those of black South African origin [is] taken out of the syllabus." In addition to the participant whose definition this is, another added: "For decolonised education to be introduced, the existing system must be overthrown and the people it's supposed to serve must define it for themselves." The researchers judge this to be a very treacherous way of thinking. Under section 3.2 it has been pointed out that the scarcity of theory and evidence-based research from which to draw presents a complication in the pursuit of transforming a colonial and Eurocentric curriculum. Because there is not sufficiently-developed African content to jettison Western education without leaving a void, Wingfield (2017) and Ramogale, in conjunction with the researchers, advise that South African educators develop curricula that build on the best knowledge, skills, morals, beliefs and traditions from around the world. These curricula cannot originate from one country or one continent – be it Africa or Europe. Balance in the form of cross-cultural collaboration is essential. The new curriculum should allow Freud and Fanon to co-exist. With Afrocentrism a means rather than an end, the curriculum should start with the known (Africa) and progress to the unknown (the West and the Rest). In summary, the decolonisation of the curriculum should

therefore not be about destroying Western knowledge but about decentring or deterritorialising it and recovering the culture, history and languages of the African people and using these to inform the present and imagine an alternative, more inclusive future.

4.4. Resistance to change

Like Jansen (2018), two participants (22%) identified resistance to change as an obstacle to decolonising models of academic organisation. This resistance, according to the participants, stems from a number of academics and students in higher education faculties who are content with the status quo and prefer to deal with the devil they know rather than the one they don't. In consequence, these academics and students support an ideology of white supremacy (Pillay, 2015) that sanctifies the values and beliefs of the colonial powers, and they allow colonial relations of production to shape academic practices. The participants demanded that the issue of the curriculum be addressed in Africa's struggle against the legacy of cultural imperialism. A curriculum that is accessible to African people by speaking to their needs and experiences will deracinate the epistemic violence that is inflicted on students – "the subalterns", in the words of one of the participants. However, the researchers assert that decolonising the curriculum is not about throwing out the old in favour of the new and replacing white theorists with black theorists. It is a mind-set that needs to change. Learning has to occur from the inside out – from the known to the unknown, the simple to the complex and the local to the international. The total educational experience should abide by the continuity imperative and consist of more than just the themes and topics covered in a course, but incorporate and integrate the outlooks, values, dispositions and world views of different nations. The new curriculum should be "a cocktail of different inputs" and "a blend of African and Western knowledges," as the two afore-mentioned participants proclaimed. The transformation of the curriculum will then be an impetus for the transformation of entire educational system as well as our society and the economy.

5. CONCLUSION

This article investigated four of the main challenges that exist in the process of decolonising the South African higher education curriculum, specifically lack of content and intellectual authorities, time, the alleged superiority of Western knowledge, and resistance to change. The investigation was performed by a review of literature that explores the collapse of colonial rule pitted against the perpetuation of westernised scholarly supremacy. The theoretical framework of conflict theory and students' protests confirm that change is long overdue. In

addition to engaging with the literature, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with nine academics. The academics answered identical questions, but gave unique responses that were germane to their perceptions of the obstacles faced in transforming the content of a curriculum predicated on the assumption of white European intellectual superiority and rationality. The challenges that were identified while doing the interviews aligned with the theories propounded by the literature.

The researchers believe that decolonisation is feasible. A new cross-cultural curriculum should be developed that does not estrange students but builds on their histories, knowledge systems and worldviews and solves problems related to the African continent. The researchers recommend a balanced approach for the South African future: a hybrid curriculum where the youth will have the best education – with one foot in Africa as their stepping stone and with the other making strides on a global platform where they take part as intellectual equals. This curriculum should draw on best practices nationally and internationally and embrace the totality of human knowledge. As the 12th century theologian John of Salisbury put it, it is only by “standing on the shoulders of giants that we can see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.”

Future researchers in the field could conduct interviews with a cohort of participants from a range of universities across South Africa. A comparative study could also be carried out where participants are interviewed one year, and again after they have gained more experience in implementing and teaching a hybrid curriculum that makes provision for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems and skills in the country’s higher education system.

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